

# Beyond Asiatic Despotism: The Stagecraft of Erwin Piscator's Adaptation of *Tai Yang erwacht* (1931)

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*Abstract.* While exotification hinges on the imagined or fantastical in order to dominate or 'other' its subject, objectivity was upheld as a guiding principle by practitioners of socialist epic theatre in their ambitions to broadcast historical materialist truth. Both Erwin Piscator's stagecraft for the 1931 premiere of Friedrich Wolf's *Tai Yang erwacht* at Berlin's Wallner-Theater, and its stage scenery by former Dadaist, John Heartfield, sought to foster a sense of proletarian, transcultural identity. Heartfield produced protest banners displaying slogans in German and Chinese script, framing parallels between imperial oppression in both countries, messaging reinforced with film projections. In tracing the progression of the female protagonist from factory worker to communist rebel, this collaborative piece successfully bypassed many tropes of 'the Orient' that otherwise saturated Weimar entertainment culture. This paper therefore asks: as postcolonial theory increasingly eschews notions of universal commonality for a more nuanced understanding of pluralities and intersections of identity, how may we critically assess the case study of *Tai Yang erwacht* today?

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*Tai Yang erwacht* (*Tai Yang awakes*) depicts the awakening of class consciousness in a textile factory worker, Tai. The play is set in Shanghai in 1927, the year of the Shanghai massacre, a purge of the Communist Party of China by factions in the nationalist Kuomintang government under Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>1</sup> Erwin Piscator's (1893–1966) last production before he left for Moscow following his sixth bankruptcy, the play featured performances from the 'Junge Volksbühne' collective and the 'Roten Tänzer' dance troupe.<sup>2</sup> It premiered in Berlin's dilapidated Wallner-Theater in 1931 during a period of economic and political

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Wolf and Henning Müller, *Wer war Wolf?: Friedrich Wolf (1888–1953) in Selbstzeugnissen, Bilddokumenten und Erinnerungen* (Cologne: Röderberg-Verlag, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Untitled commentary by Sergei Tretyakov in *Erwin Piscator: Political theatre, 1920–1966. A photographic exhibition from the German Democratic Republic*, ed. by Ludwig Hoffmann, trans. by Margaret Vallance (London: Hayward Gallery, 1971), p. 37. 'Young People's Theatre', 'Red Dancers'. Translations are author's own unless otherwise stated. The Roten Tänzer choreography was devised by Jean (Hans) Weidt (1904–88).

freefall in Germany. *Tai Yang erwacht* presents a collaboration between some of the most significant figures in leftist German theatre at the time. The play's director, Piscator, was the first to develop epic theatre before Bertolt Brecht adopted and further adapted the genre. The script was penned by prominent socialist writer, Friedrich Wolf (1888–1953), and its innovative set design was executed by former Dadaist, John Heartfield (1891–1968). Yet the play has received scant attention in the literature on Piscator, and is discussed at length in no more than a handful of contemporary reviews, mostly in the German Communist Party (KPD) press.<sup>3</sup> This lack of recent critical analysis is particularly surprising, as applying a lens of intersectional postcolonialism reveals a staged narrative that, while far from immune to orientalised discourse, nonetheless sought to directly interrogate constructs of race against a sensitively observed backdrop of capitalist imperialism. In addressing how these issues intersect with the epic theatre format's treatment of character, gender, language and space, this discussion draws from wide-ranging source material beyond the published script, such as the accompanying programme, photographs, theatre reviews, and relevant correspondence.

### **Marxist thought and the case of China: an avant-garde response to stirs of revolution**

Sinologists rightly highlight the limits of a postcolonial framework in any examination of Sino-Western relations, given that the country was never formally colonized. In response to this quandary, literary scholar Ming Dong Gu deploys the term 'sinologism' to signal a diversion from Edward Said's notion of 'orientalism', first formulated in 1978.<sup>4</sup> Even before Britain enforced the trade relations on the country that led to the Opium wars (1839–42, 1856–60), the very autonomy of the Chinese civilization kindled Western anxieties of the Other, most archetypally in Hegel's characterization of the Chinese empire as 'the realm of theocratic despotism' in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (delivered 1822–30, posthumously published by Eduard Gans in 1837).<sup>5</sup> Hegel's view that China existed in a state of despotic petrification was further perpetuated by his follower, Karl Marx, who described the country, in its economic isolationism, as 'a mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin'.<sup>6</sup> Marx and Engels developed the notion of an 'Asiatic mode of

<sup>3</sup> See Ludwig Hoffmann and Klaus Pfützner, *Theater der Kollektive: Proletarisch-revolutionäres Berufstheater in Deutschland 1928–1933: Stücke, Dokumente, Studien* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1980), 1, pp. 248–50.

<sup>4</sup> Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, (New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Marx on China, 1853–1860: Articles from The New York Daily Tribune* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1951), p. 4, cited in Donald M. Lowe, *The Function of "China" in Marx, Lenin and Mao* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 19.

production' to elucidate this perceived state of entrenched feudalism prevalent in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

Practitioners of epic theatre sought broadly to uphold Marxist thought, emphasizing material conditions over the emotionalism of the dramatic self as a means of developing class-critical sensibilities in their audience. Wolf wrote *Tai Yang erwacht* as an epic theatre *Gegenstück* to Alfred Henschke's 'bourgeois' *Der Kreidekreis* (*The Chalk Circle*) (1925), itself based on the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) epic by Li Qianfu.<sup>8</sup> In the context of epic theatre, the intertextual protagonist of *Der Kreidekreis*, Hai Tang, is refigured in Wolf's script as Tai Yang, a metonym for the Chinese proletariat. Despite the international left's ardent engagement with Marxist thought, seismic shifts in the Chinese political landscape, such as the fall of the millennia-old imperial system in 1912 and the May the Fourth Movement of 1919, prompted a reappraisal of China's revolutionary potential. There was a prevailing sense that, if China could catalyze a communist revolution, a global process could feasibly follow.

### Unmasking capitalist imperialism: yellowface and data on stage

It was this context that informed Piscator's suggestion to include a prologue commencing with the actors changing into costume before dressing room tables and mirrors on stage (Fig. 1). The audience watched as the cast applied stage makeup and costume to fashion a synthetic Chinese ethnicity, daubing yellowface get ups onto, in the words of Piscator, 'europäischen Gesichtern'.<sup>9</sup> According to scholar Krystyn R. Moon, 'yellowface', a term derived from 'blackface', is designed to codify an imagined inferiority of the Chinese body, perpetuating stereotypes around peoples of East Asian descent through a permutation of racialized costume, makeup and acting.<sup>10</sup>

*Tai Yang erwacht* presents a chimeric engagement with the category of yellowface, at once spotlighting, and even ritualizing, the act of applying the stage makeup, whilst also ultimately deconstructing the actors' ethnic guise. To develop this theatrical frame and interlace epic elements into the drama, Wolf suggested that the actors continue to step in and out of character throughout the play, during the interval, and outside the theatre.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the male cast members shatter the stage's illusory qualities in this manner, the women actors change silently behind a screen during the prologue, with the unfortunate effect of reconfiguring a Western male gaze directed at a female 'Other'. The silence of lead actress Constanze Menz during this staged preamble did little to reflect

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John Willett, *Brecht in Context: Comparative Approaches* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 91. '[C]ounterwork'.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 234. '[E]uropean faces'.

<sup>10</sup> Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music & Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 237.



FIG. 1. Lotte Jacobi, Untitled (Prologue of *Tai Yang erwacht*), 1931. Akademie der Künste Archiv, Berlin. Reproduced with the kind permission from the University of New Hampshire, Lotte Jacobi Papers (1898-2000) dept.

her significant contribution to the script, as it was Menz who arranged for the relevant research materials to be sent to Wolf via a professor from the Chinese institute in Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

The marginalized position of the women in the prologue, perhaps a result of Piscator's intervention, similarly failed to reflect Wolf's own feminist views. By 1931, Wolf, who was both a writer and a qualified doctor, had established a reputation as an advocate for women's rights and health. The 1930 film adaptation of his play *Cyankali* (1929), based on the draconian abortion clause §218 in the Weimar penal code, provoked such controversy that it was banned in southern Germany, leading to Wolf's temporary incarceration.<sup>13</sup> In *Tai Yang erwacht*, the playwright's representation of China's 'base' as a female proletariat of factory weavers is significant in feminist and postcolonial terms, as it was indigenous handicraft industries, such as the predominantly female craft of silk weaving, which were all but wiped out by abrupt industrialization.<sup>14</sup> Based on accounts from academic sources on workers' conditions in China, Wolf

<sup>12</sup> Wolf, cited in Michael Kienzle and Dirk Mende, *Ausstellungsreihe: Friedrich Wolf, die Jahre in Stuttgart 1927-1933* (Stuttgart: Eigenverlag, 1983), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Wolf and Müller, *Wer war Wolf?*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>14</sup> Lowe, *China*, p. 21.

depicted how the weavers — the ‘spiders of Shanghai’ — hid their still-nursing infants under the machines, sedating them with an opium tonic to elude the admonitions of their superior.<sup>15</sup>

Geopolitical concerns discussed during the prologue were designed to heighten the pathos of this episode. Not yet fully in character, male players conversed at the dressing tables on domestic politics and the Nazis. When the actor playing the communist Wan (Potrow in earlier scripts) broaches the topic of revolutionary unrest in China, the figures on stage begin to progressively adopt their respective characters.<sup>16</sup> Vocalizing questions and concerns germane to their staged identities produces a subtle gradation of characterization, diminishing the presence of performative yellowface in the form of exaggerated and racialized mimicry. Equally, however, one of Piscator’s most fundamental edits to Wolf’s original script was his recommendation that the German text should nod to the tonality of the Chinese language by adopting a ‘kürzere Ausdrucksform’, the precise effect of which would have been contingent on the actors’ delivery of the script.<sup>17</sup> The published version of the prologue also sees the actors discuss the average Chinese wage, priming the audience for the play’s phantasmagoria of statistics on workers’ conditions, pedagogical elements integral to epic theatre’s portrayal of materialist history.

Vertical format banners bearing raw data — ‘Fisch und Fleisch machen nur 3% der chinesischen Ernährung aus’ — vehemently informed the dramatic action by visually overwhelming the stage (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> Piscator intended for the banners to lend the play a ‘Demonstrationscharakter’, an impression relayed in Brecht’s account of Heartfield’s banners in his *Kleines Organon für das Theater (Short Organum for Theatre)* (1948): ‘reversible flags [...] mark changes in the political situation of which the persons on the stage were sometimes unaware’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in a review published in the KPD organ, *Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag)*, critic Alfred Durus wrote, ‘die Dekorationen [...] verringern den Gegensatz zwischen Bühne und Wirklichkeit auf ein Mindestmaß’, recalling the intention of their designers to overcome, at least in part, imagined constructs of Chinese culture.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See 39:39 — 40:20, *Shanghai Document*, dir. by Yakov Bliokh (Soyuzkino, 1928) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7GfjKvxq4>> [accessed 2 February 2019]. Friedrich Wolf, *Dramen: Die Matrosen von Cattaro, Tai Yang erwacht, Die Jungens von Mons, Professor Mamlock, Laurencia*, Gesammelte Werke (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1960), pp. 115–16.

<sup>16</sup> Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233. ‘[S]horter form of expression’.

<sup>18</sup> Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (Berlin: Albert Schulz Verlag, 1929; repr. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 343. ‘Fish and meat make up only 3% of the Chinese diet’.

<sup>19</sup> Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 235. ‘[D]emonstrative character’. Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), cited in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (Berlin: Albert Schulz Verlag, 1964; repr. London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Durus, ‘Bühnendekoration von Heartfield’, *Die Rote Fahne*, 22 January 1931, cited in Wieland Herzfelde, *John Heartfield, Leben und Werk: dargestellt von seinem Bruder, Wieland Herzfelde* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1971), p. 331. ‘[T]he props... minimise the contradiction between stage and reality’.



FIG. 2. Lotte Jacobi, Untitled (stage scenery, *Tai Yang erwacht*), 1931. Akademie der Künste Archiv, Berlin. Reproduced with the kind permission from the University of New Hampshire, Lotte Jacobi Papers (1898-2000) dept.

One of Said's critiques of the field of Oriental studies was the discipline's ascription of scientific truth to exclusively Western thought.<sup>21</sup> While the looming statistics on stage do partially replicate these associations, the script itself inserts episodes clearly designed to ridicule imperialism's pretensions at domination through its social-scientific analysis of foreign cultures. For example, a representative from the British Red Cross, Miss Lund, steps into the role of an anthropologist by taking notes in Tai's family home, purportedly unable to contain her delight at the quaint poverty of the lodgings, 'Man muß das Volk von allen Seiten kennenlernen! Ich liebe sehr das Volk in seiner Einfachkeit und Poesie'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the British Red Cross is framed in the plot as an agent of capitalist imperialism, seeking to tacitly further British imperial vested interests in this new primary industry in Shanghai while touting a public face of philanthropy. It is when textile agent Ixman is discussing tactical cooperation with the Red Cross to the factory director that he surreptitiously refutes Orientalism's primary dichotomy, observing that the 'Fronten' of

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Wolf, *Dramen*, p. 110. 'One has to get to know the people from all angles! How I love them, in their simplicity and poetry'.

today are comprised not of Occident and Orient, but of foreign and Chinese managerial classes, such as themselves, against the 'chaotischen Massen'.<sup>23</sup>

### Linguistic autonomy and the 'plasticization' of materialist history

Beyond debunking tropes and exposing microaggressions, one of the play's most foundational challenges to prevailing notions of Orientalism was its staging of the Chinese language. At the end of the prologue, the actors crowd round 'the philosopher', Hung Ming, as he delivers a condensed retelling of materialist Chinese history. He illustrates his short lecture with an ideogram drawn on his dressing table mirror. The mirror comprises of a spotlight which projects the Chinese character onto a screen behind the dressing tables, transforming the stage into a magnification of Hung Ming's mirror. He explains that the ideogram stands for the 'Tsching-Sin-System' established by 'Wang-Tsin' in 2700 BC, a Saturnalian era during which land was neither bought nor sold, but was instead evenly and justly distributed in a taxation system, leading to unrivalled stability and prosperity.<sup>24</sup> The verbal assertion that a system with strong parallels to Communism had a successful historical precedent in China, followed by the presentation of its own ideogram, strengthened the play's call to socialism by grounding socialist ideals in the realm of the plausible.

Western misinterpretations surrounding Chinese script inform a large part of sinologized discourse. The Western avant-garde was by no means exempt from these misconceptions, as is exemplified by Ezra Pound's 'Essay on the Chinese Written Character' (1919) and his *ABC of Reading* (1934). According to the American poet, as Chinese script is primarily pictographic, it operates referentially, citing the physical — as opposed to metaphysical — world, causing it to manifest in a proliferation of similes and metaphors.<sup>25</sup> However, as Gu explains in his essay on the subject, ideograms, also known as ideographs, are not directly pictographic, but derive their form from the interpretation of 'salient features' of a concept.<sup>26</sup> These prevalent features are then abstracted and formed into an 'constructed likeness' via a 'maximum economy of representation'.<sup>27</sup> Correspondingly, Hung Ming demonstrates how the 'Wortschild' for the 'Tsching-Sin-System' stands for an interpretation of the salient feature of the epoch's economic model, quoting the 'Schema der Landeinteilung', in which eight square units were assigned to each family.<sup>28</sup> Lines of particular significance, such as a description of the Tsching-Sin-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 132. '[B]attle fronts', 'chaotic masses'.

<sup>24</sup> 'Vorspiel des Piscator-Kollektivs' (the Piscator Collective's Prologue) repr. in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, pp. 239–45 (p. 240). Written by Wolf with edits from Piscator.

<sup>25</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> Ming Dong Gu, 'Reconceptualizing the Linguistic Divide: Chinese and Western Theories of the Written Sign', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 37 (2000), 101–24 (p. 104).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> 'Vorspiel', in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 242. '[W]ritten sign', 'pattern of land distribution'.

System, are performed in German and Mandarin, providing an auditory counterpart to the Chinese script.

Piscator and Wolf were fairly explicit about their agenda to 'provide an example for action in Germany' rather than furthering awareness of worker exploitation in China.<sup>29</sup> Their Germano-centric agenda cannot, however, account for the decision to integrate Chinese language elements. In both vocalized and textual form, the original language remains intact onstage to striking effect, while the translations twinned with these Chinese concepts or slogans impede any fetishizing of their aesthetic formalism.

Said aligns persistent tropes of the Orient's muteness with the imposition of 'feminine' and 'supine' qualities, noting the enforced power dynamic when an oriental voice is unable to speak for itself and must be 'articulated' by the 'learned authority of a philologist'.<sup>30</sup> As opposed to communicating muteness, the presence of the Chinese language here concedes its own untranslatability. Its prominent position proffers an admission that linguistic renderings of reality are inescapably bound to culture, setting up an autonomous realm of meaning impervious to colonization in response.

This quality of untranslatability was also compounded by Heartfield's stage set design. Banners bearing Chinese characters hung from the gallery alongside those with German slogans, highlighting parallels between the legacies of German and Chinese imperial oppression, and transforming the theatre into a communist meeting hall (Fig. 2). Russian writer Sergei Tretyakov wrote in 1936 that the written word is 'unentbehrlich' in Heartfield's work, a mantra that may be extended to his avid interest in Chinese script.<sup>31</sup> Heartfield repeatedly incorporated Chinese characters into his design work: for example, in a cover of the German translation of Tretyakov's *Roar, China!* published by the Malik Verlag in 1932.<sup>32</sup> In foregrounding the original Chinese language, Heartfield's scenery and Piscator's stagecraft anticipated a turn in translation studies typified by the work of George Steiner, who was among the first to question whether 'the transference of semantic energies between mutually distinct and reciprocally incomprehending [sic] tongues is always feasible'.<sup>33</sup>

The filmic elements of *Tai Yang erwacht* presented another strategy of immersive staging, incorporating similarly direct references to China. Film projections were deployed sparingly, reserved for scenes such as the 'workers' scene', showing women at mechanical silk looms, and the 'shooting scene'.<sup>34</sup> They projected footage from Soviet director Yakov Bliokh's film *Shanghai*

<sup>29</sup> Piscator, *Political Theatre*, p. 343.

<sup>30</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *John Heartfield: Eine Monographie* (Moscow: Ogis, 1936), cited in Herzfelde, *Heartfield, Leben und Werk*, p. 337. '[I]ndispensable'.

<sup>32</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *Den Shi Chua. Ein junger Chinese erzählt sein Leben. Bio-Interview*, trans. by A. Kurella (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1932).

<sup>33</sup> George Steiner, 'On an Exact Art (Again)', *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 4.2 (1982), 8–21 (p. 9).

<sup>34</sup> See 41:16 – 41:37 and 48:24 – 48:34, Bliokh, *Shanghai Document*.

*Document* (1928), a work censored in Germany during the run of *Tai Yang erwacht* at the Wallner-Theater.<sup>35</sup> Piscator planted an actor in the audience who was to accuse the play's creators of fabricating the action shown on stage. In direct response to this outburst, excerpts from Bliokh's film were then projected onto the *Roten Tänzer*, whose choreographed bodies re-formed into a succession of demonstrators flooding the stage.<sup>36</sup> The line of protesters held blank banners, forming a live projection screen for the film, generating the effect of a double exposure of the play's revolutionary content. Scholar Christopher Innes interprets the use of intermedia here as a reinforcement of the truth value of the narrative action.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than linking the film's mimetic value to authenticity, the *Verfremdungseffekt* or, in Piscatorian terms, the 'direct confrontation' caused by the new medium on stage may perhaps be more aptly described as a reaffirmation of the artifice of the stage action.<sup>38</sup> Through introducing the second medium of film, Piscator rewards his audience for questioning the truth value of the stage action alone, moving towards epic theatre's aim of fostering the critical thought needed to engender 'awakenings' of class consciousness in audience members. In the epic theatre context of competing pools of information, present in the form of the statistics, the Chinese language, and the narrative drama, the projected film acts as another mode of translation in the play's medley of linguistic and representational schema.

Responding to the illegibility of the script on many of the banners he crafted, Heartfield produced a textual piece for the programme entitled *Die Dekorationen sprechen (The Decorations Speak)*. Stacked between his poem's two columns, the phrase 'Long live Soviet China!' descends vertically alongside its translation into Chinese characters, establishing a clear visual correlation with the vertical format banners on stage. In the verse proper, written in the style of a playscript with different speaking parts, the stage scenery communicates with the protagonist in a predominately uppercase script. The poem follows a principle outlined in Piscator's text, 'Objective Acting': in epic theatre, the 'prop [...] is no longer mere support, but is a plastic detail of full human utterance'.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing on motifs of automata from the artist's earlier work with the Berlin Dadaists from c. 1918–21, anthropomorphized walls decry the suffering they have witnessed, streets proclaim their disenfranchisement, and factory machines go on strike with the demonstrators. The piece reaches its apotheosis at a fork in the road. Tai must choose between 'EINE MORSCHE WACKLIGE

<sup>35</sup> 'Die Zensurmaschine arbeitet. Filmszenen in "Tai Yang" verboten', *Berlin am Morgen*, 20 January 1931, cited in Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199. The Brechtian term *Verfremdungseffekt*, originally translated as 'alienation effect' by John Willett in 1964, is now frequently translated as 'distancing effect'.

<sup>39</sup> Piscator, 'Objective Acting', in Hoffmann, *Political theatre, 1920–1966*, p. 59–65 (p. 59).

BRUECKE RECHTS' and a 'FESTER STEG LINKS'.<sup>40</sup> While the treacherous bridge to the right promises to guide her to 'ruhiger Arbeit', the strong bridge to the left condemns the 'Wucher und Galgen' of the workday, drawing the poem to a close with the lines, 'EIN WEG NUR IST OFFEN! [...] VORAN MEINEN WEG!'<sup>41</sup> Heartfield's imagery alludes to two bamboo walkways on either side of the Wallner-Theater stage, analogizing these bridges from stage right and stage left as opposing ends of the political spectrum, envisioned as a binary of oppression and emancipation. The verse also alludes to an exchange in scene eight, where Wan portrays Tai's suppression as a thick, consuming 'Stumpf' from which the communist rebels offer to retrieve her by extending a hand to pull her up onto a 'harte, steinige Straße'.<sup>42</sup>

Like the layers of translation created by the overlay of theatre and film, the leitmotif of pathways displayed through different media — in the play's dialogue, in the stage set, and in Heartfield's textual piece — provides a spatial reconceptualization of temporality in materialist history. As one anonymous review in the party press stated, 'Noch nie hat ein revolutionärer Regisseur die materialistische Dialektik der Geschichte szenisch so plastisch geformt'.<sup>43</sup> Yet this is not deterministic materialist history in a teleological sense, caught on a single track in an ever-resolving dialectic towards Communism. Rather, materialist history is written in *Tai Yang erwacht* as a miscellany of indeterminate crossroads. By staging revolutionary activity in China, where labour had barely separated from the mode of production but was already prey to capitalist exploitation by domestic and international agents, the script undermined the Hegelian notion of China's inertia, instead holding it up to Europe as a model for revolutionary progress. The resulting play then not only overwrote Marx's Asiatic mode of production with its focus on revolutionary China, but it also provided a revised model of materialist history as a series of unpredictable junctures.

### Conclusion: remoulding Asiatic despotism into intercultural exchange

To conclude, the narrative's focus on the oppressed demographic of female weavers in Shanghai does not preclude its othering of China, whose class struggle is deemed of interest first and foremost through its importance to Germany. Yet this collaboration between three prominent avant-garde members of the KPD birthed a work that renegotiated the act of othering into a dialectical exchange. Driven by the prospect of stirring revolution in Germany, *Tai Yang erwacht*

<sup>40</sup> John Heartfield, 'Die Dekorationen sprechen', in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 247. '[A] RAMSHACKLE, SHAKY BRIDGE TO THE RIGHT', 'STEADFAST GANGPLANK TO THE LEFT'.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. '[Q]uiet work', 'usury and gallows', 'ONLY ONE PATH IS OPEN! ... FORWARDS ON MY PATH!'.

<sup>42</sup> Wolf, *Dramen*, p. 161. '[B]og', 'hard, stony street'.

<sup>43</sup> Anon., *Rote Fahne*, 17 January 1931, cited and translated in Innes, *Modern German Drama*, p. 117. 'Never before has a revolutionary director given such a plastic scenic form to the materialistic dialectic of history', my translation.

undertook an earnest examination of cultural relativity and intersectionality. Revolutionary communist uprisings in China necessitated a radical departure from traditional Marxist ideas, granting Piscator and his peers the space to reimagine historical materialism, leading them, in the words of reviewer Otto Bikha, to 'link dialectically the Chinese revolution and the class war in Germany'.<sup>44</sup> Piscator's resultant 'plasticization' of Wolf's script harnessed three central strategies: the deconstruction of yellowface; the privileging of materialist data over essentialized racial identity; and the preservation of the autonomy of Chinese language elements. The stagecraft's tripartite challenge to orientalist precepts affirms a thesis in Heartfield's introduction to his poem, 'Die Dekoration bringt nicht nur Atmosphäre, sondern auch den Inhalt des Dramas'.<sup>45</sup>

Far from exhibiting a dogmatic adherence to Marxist doctrine, *Tai Yang erwacht* in fact addresses weaknesses of Marx's historical materialism, rooted in racial bias at the heart of the theory's derivative Hegelianism. Piscator's stagecraft was therefore also 'plastic' in its adaptability and openness to historical events as they unfolded in real terms. Embodying Wolf's aspiration to present the theatre 'nicht als Illusion [...] sondern als Praxis', the original 1931 production of *Tai Yang erwacht* was most significant in the ways that it diverged from Marx's orientalized vision of history.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Otto Bikha, 'Revolutionsonnyi teatr Germanii', *Internatsional'naiia literatura*, 7 (1932), p. 110, cited in Clark, *Moscow*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Heartfield in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 246. 'The decorations summon not only the drama's atmosphere, but also its content'. Heartfield's emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Wolf, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 237. '...[N]ot as illusion ... but as praxis'.